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Awaiting the Verdict

It is early yet for so many people to be talking and writing, often with venomous self-righteousness, about "the guilt of Mr. Nixon." After all, he is still President of the United States. Common sense ought to forbid holding Presidents guilty of crimes until all the evidence is in.

God knows, later evidence may show that the President had full knowledge and complicity in all that mattered in the Watergate horror. Anything seems possible nowadays. But while awaiting the final verdict, it is worth examining the other possibility.

The right place to begin is with a personal reminiscence. Some time ago, this reporter was one of a large group attending an awards ceremony in the President's Oval Office in the White House. That day the room itself was the only thing that was either striking or memorable. It is a room, one must note, on which every previous President always put the strongest kind of personal mark. Yet President Nixon's Oval Office looks as if it had just come from the hands of an expensive but rather second-rate decorator. It is totally impersonal, and it seems never to have been used at all. This is natural, too, since it never is used for real day-to-day work. So John Ehrlichman was asked why on earth the President preferred his hideaway in the Executive Office Building to this lovely, sunny oval room with a garden view.

"It's odd," said Ehrlichman in reply, "but the truth is that the President hates to work with a window behind his desk."

As it happens, hating to work with a window behind your desk is a classic symptom of mild agoraphobia. Agoraphobia, of course, is the opposite of claustrophobia, being an obsessive dislike of large crowds and wide open spaces. For anyone with mild agoraphobia to be a highly successful politician must in fact have required astonishing self-discipline.

But that is the kind of President we have, as is also proven by Richard M. Nixon's extreme reclusiveness and many other signs as well. In and of itself, having a mildly agoraphobic President is not at all dreadful. All of us have a little or a lot of agoraphobia or claustrophobia.

"All that the President's aides valued most might have been lost had they imitated young George Washington after the cherry tree affair."

Yet if the President is indeed not guilty of any of the worst of the Watergate horror, it is also true that his mild agoraphobia has led to dreadful results. It caused him, first of all, to cut himself off almost totally from all but five men: the White House managers, H. R. Haldeman and his junior partner, Ehrlichman; the White House political operative, Charles Colson; the Republican bagman, Maurice Stans; and the campaign-manager-crony, former Attorney General John Mitchell.

Almost literally no others—except of course Mrs. Nixon and Dr. Henry A. Kissinger—had genuine access to the President when the Watergate break-in first surfaced, or for many, many months thereafter. John Dean III, for instance, had the important-sounding title of "Counsel to the President." He self-importantly told all and sundry that he was seeing the President constantly, and was believed because of his title. In fact, however, Dean was lying, for he was just as much cut off from the President as everyone else.

Consider, then, the situation that resulted when the Watergate-break-in first occurred. When the news of this piece of folly reached the President, he is known to have been all but uncontainably furious. He was still coldly angry when he called in Attorney General Richard Kleindienst, and told him emphatically, "the matter should be thoroughly investigated; let the chips fall where they may."

Consider, further, the situation of the men around the President, who had vast power and loved it, yet were deeply implicated in the Watergate break-in according to all present evidence. How did they reply when he asked them: "What goddam fool did this?" All they valued most might have been lost to them, if they had imitated young George Washington after the cherry tree affair, by replying, "Mr. President, we cannot tell a lie. We did it."

Everything that happened thereafter would have flowed quite naturally from that first untruth by these men whom the President trusted absolutely, who also controlled all access to him, who further had authority to give orders in his name. Alas, however, saying it could have happened this way is altogether different from saying it really did happen in this way. This is why the President's role needs immediate clearing up.

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